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ABSTRACT

The connection of feminism and ecology into ecofeminism has important congruencies with the teaching of writing and literacy, creating an important web of influence between language, politics, and planet. The four central claims of ecofeminism are: (1) there is a connection between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women; (2) the reason for the connection of ecology and feminism is the objectification of nature and women; (3) science and technology are a tool of patriarchal dominance; and (4) nature and women must be revalued. Parallels to ecofeminism are suggested in the writing workshop classroom, where peer groups respond to drafts, the teacher confers with writers, and everyone writes the stories and arguments important to them. Recent theoretical understandings of text and readers/writers have moved in a direction congruent with ecofeminism, as recent literary theory attempts to restore subjectivity to its rightful place in the action of reading literature, and sociopsycholinguistics portrays readers and writers as actively making meaning, not taking meaning from some pre-existent objective text. The move in research methodology has been from patriarchal sci-tech to naturalistic and organic designs. Classroom practice also shows parallels to ecofeminism, by forming communities of readers, reading from a non-hierarchical canon, giving students ownership and authorship, and valuing diversity and connectedness. (Seventeen references are attached.) (SR)

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In a now classic 1980 book, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution, Carolyn Merchant cautions those who would connect feminism and ecology that some will resist because the women/nature connection historically reinforced by patriarchy is what needs to be broken--women do not profit from association with something that Western culture also degrades. But, I would argue, that culture may just profit from the connection of feminism and ecology if that connection is seen as a liberatory political and social construction of those who deplore the denigration of women and nature, supplying that cuture with a radical transformative vision that could liberate women and save the planet. I believe the ecofeminist connection could become the source for a resocilalization of women and men into an egalitarian state of humans and environment.

In what follows I would like to show that the ecofeminist connection has important congruencies with the teaching of writing and literacy, creating what I believe to be an important web of influence between language, politics and planet. First I would like to characterize ecofeminism by describing what I see as it's 4 major claims. Then I'd like to show how what is currently recommended in the teaching of writing in many ways parallels issues in these central claims of ecofemininsm.

The Central Claims of Ecofeminism

Claim #1--There is a connection between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women.

Ecofeminists establish this connection by showing that in both cases it is the masculinist and patriarchal drive for dominance, what Charlene Spretnak calls the "patriarchal power grab," that is at the heart of all exploitations, treating nurturant nature and nurturant women as commodities (Salleh). Iris Marion Young puts it this way: "Since the exploitation of nature is bound to social processes that oppress people, and since the logic of all these systems of domination is modeled on the logic of male domination, neither nature nor women will be liberated without an explicit confrontation with the structures of male dominance." For ecofeminists, it is patriarchy's domination that is the problem that needs to be addressed by the politics of liberation because there will be no liberation for women nor a solution to the environmental crisis "in a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (Warren).

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Karen Warren sees this exploitive dominance arising from the value-hierarchical thinking that characterizes patriarchy, and Elizabeth Dodson Gray sees patriarchy as organized by an overpowering hierarchical metaphor of Up-Down, the higher being the superior or the only values. This up-down valuing when mediated by the logic of domination allows inequality with a smile. Where before among humans-in-nature there was just diversity, now there is superiority and its political crone inequality. Ecofeminists encourage us to see beyond the partriarchcal hierarchy that allows dominance and exploitation of the less valued, be it nature or women, to a feminist vision that might simultaneously free women and save the planet.

Claim #2--The reason for the connection of ecology and feminism is the objectification of nature and women.

The destruction of the environment and the oppression of women are easy to do because nature and women are seen as "other" to the dominant patriarchy through its "one-eyed Jack" split vision of masculinist selfhood that requires men to establish their difference from the natural world--the price of self is other, of subject is object. This "one-eyed Jack" vision creates multiple dichotomies which seem justified in the masculinist world whose vision splits the subjective and transcendent from the objective and immanent, splits mind from body and nature from culture and value from fact. This spliting yields things that are "other," and, in the present case, nature and women become an object and a commodity. Philosopher of science, Gregory Bateson, noted that one of the most basic misconceptions, reinforced by thousands of cultural details, is that we are autonomous individuals who observe and make rational decisions about a world that is "other" to us. Michael Zimmerman finds the autonomous individualism of patriarchy as the source of destruction of the fabric of community, concluding that we are, therefore, unable to care for the members of our community much less the natural world.

Ecofeminists argue the inadequecy of the dualistic modes of thought and the dichotomous seperations created by the "one-eyed" vision of patriarchy. Ynestra King calls for a sense of connection among all human and nonhuman entities; Charlene Spretnak decribes an ecocentric web in which human life is embedded, and ecotheologian Thomas Berry calls for the intercommunion of subjectivities. The dualism of self and women or self and nature is replaced by a complexity of interrelatedness, the world as a symbiotic unity more powerful for its variation. Gone are dualisms and dichotomies; ecofeminists give us interrelatedness, community, whole, all existing in the healthy diversity and connectivity of living and nonliving entities. As feminist theologian Catherine Keller says, "We are all an instance of becoming-in-relation."

Claim #3--Science and technology are a tool of patriarchal dominance.

Iris Marion Young claims that ecofeminists must be against

science and technology as presently practiced because of sci-tech's view that the natural world is something to be mastered even conquered--the dominance theme of patriarchy--and because of sci-tech's wholesale acceptance of objective over subjective and fact over value--the myopic dualism of masculinist metaphysics. The hardheadedness of contemporary science must be abandoned because, as Ariel Kay Salleh reminds us, "empirical reason has been historically bounded to the denial of our connectedness to nature and the analytical blade of patriarchal science has wrought enough destruction." Physicist Brian Swimme sees sci-tech's reductionism, its insistence on analysis and categorization as blinding us to the whole, and states, "only when scientific facts are interpreted by an ecofeminist consciousness will we even begin to see where we are, who we are and what we are about."

Yenestra King calls for a feminist science and believes that "we should not abolish science but rather we should do it as it has been done by the great women scientists like Barbara McClintock and Rachel Carson, who demonstrate that there is a connection between loving and knowing." C. A. Bowers belives current scientific practice reinforces the beliefs "that we are autonomous and rationally directed beings, that we are superior to and can act independently of other forms of life, and that we represent the most advanced stage in evolution." These sci-tech beliefs blind us to the deterioration of the natural-social ecosystem and must, therefore, be seen as part of a pathological philosophy derived from an anthropocentric and, ecofeminists would stress, androcentric culture.

Claim #4--Nature and women must be revalued.

Some ecofeminists see this revaluing as a restoration of the feminine in contemporary culture, a repair to what Dorothy Dinnerstein calls, "the killing split--the split between female and male sensibilities." Ariel Kay Salleh writes that "the supression of the feminine is truly an all pervasive human universal." It is only through a revaluing that restores the feminine to a balanced place with the masculine that can supply humans with the wholeness of personhood necessary to end the exploitation of nature and other humans. But Salleh does not believe this will happen "until men are brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves," no easy task, as Robert Bly has recently reminded us, in a patriarchy blinded by its drive for power-over, dominance, hierarchy not power-with, equality and interdependance in the web of the natural-social ecosystem. But not transcendent and abstract biotic oneness, the old masculinist dodge, but rather as Marti Kheel states, "when ecofeminists talk of all-inclusive wholes, they speak of holistic awareness of the interconnectedness of all particular beings in the lived experience of the individual-in-whole"--what she calls "women's unique felt sense of connection."

Other ecofeminists see the revaluing of nature and women as a restoration of the spiritual dimension of living lost in the productive/consumptive materialism of our whiter than white

world. Ecotheologian Thomas Berry calls for a reenchantment of the natural world so that we might be truly moved by the transcendent spirituality of nature and honor it in a profound way. He writes, "The time has come to lower our voices, to cease imposing our mechanistic patterns on the biological processes of the earth, to resist the impulse to control, to command, to force, to oppress and to begin quite humbly to follow the guidance of the larger community on which all life depends."

Ecofeminism and the Teaching of Writing

Let me now try to take the all important 4C's step--connect ecofeminism to the teaching of writing. Certainly many of you have already started to do so as you listened, or maybe you asked yourself, "What does all this, as interesting as it may be, have to do with those 3 sections of 101 that are waiting for me on Monday?" Let me try to connect ecofeminism and those 101s.

When I think of the teaching of writing, I should make it clear that I am thinking of a very specific type of classroom--what we call a workshop classroom, peer groups meeting and responding to drafts, the teacher conferring with writers one-to-one, all writing the stories and arguments important to them. I see the classroom as suggested by Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins, by Don Murray, Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie and Ken Bruffee, by Muriel Harris and Karen Spear. It is this classroom and its underlying assumptions about teaching and learning literacy that I believe is congruent with much of what ecofeminists are saying we must do to end the exploitation of nature and women. Let me draw some parallels.

For example, our recent theoretical understandings of text and reader/writer have moved in a direction congruent with ecofeminism. Recent literary theory has attempted to restore subjectivity to its rightful place in the action of reading literature, repairing the one-eyed Jack split of objective and subjective popularized by New Criticism. Now we talk of intersubjectivity and interpretive communities, calling for a repair in our philosophy similar to Thomas Berry's call for the "intercommunion of sujectivities," his new understanding of our experience of nature.

Sociopsycholinguistics also calls for repairing this split of objective/subjective, portraying the reader and writer as actively making meaning not taking meaning from some pre-existinent objective text outside their comprehending. Readers and writers are seen as interrelated in a web of language and an ecology of communication.

In our research methodology, we move from patriarchal sci-tech to naturalistic and organic designs. The reductionism of masculinist analysis and categorization is being replaced by wholistic understandings that value the lived-experience of participants, research as understanding derived from a symbiotic unity. The Researcher, with a capital "R," the superior on the patriarchal research hierarchy, is being replaced by the participant-observer, another subjectivity in a web of living and knowing. The masculinist one-eyed Jack vision of sci-tech is

being replaced by a complete ecofeminist vision that allows for seeing data-intuition and culture-nature as unities only valuable when connected.

Our classroom practice also shows parallels to ecofeminism. We form communities of readers and writers, reducing the patriarchal dominance of the teacher. We read from a non-hierarchal canon that represents writers of all colors, classes, genders. Students write what is important to them not what is assigned by a dominant teacher; they have ownership and authorship. We don't teach them as much as we nuture and empower. Our classroom has become more like a micro-environment or a biome or an ecological niche, as we see its diversity and connectivity as a richness and a model of living literacy. Our classrooms have disconnected from the political and social processes that oppress and exploit nature and people; we have undergone a "greening" of our classroom environment. We, students and teachers alike, become not atomistic individuals but rather interrelated--co-nected and co-lected--for the purpose of teaching and learning literacy. For us the classroom is reenchanted with a sense of significance and value, and sometimes even wonder as we participate in the growth of our partners in our ecology of language and literacy.

Ultimately, just as we as a profession have discussed how what we do in teaching writing effects the liberation of races, classes and genders, so too, I believe, we can now add nature--what we do in class gives students the personal and language experiences they need to end the exploitation of the environment, preparing them to save both themselves and their planet from the dominant patriarchal paradigm.

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